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## Floyd Collins and the Sand Cave Tragedy: A Possible Source for Faulkner's *As I Lay Dying*

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Lucas Carpenter

On January 30, 1925, a careless Kentucky spelunker named Floyd Collins was pinned to the floor of Sand Cave by a falling rock while looking for undiscovered caverns and a new entrance to Mammoth Cave. At about the same time—a Friday afternoon—William Faulkner, an obscure young writer from Mississippi seeking to establish himself in the then thriving New Orleans literary scene, might well have been enjoying a post-writing drink in the Vieux Carré with several journalist friends from the *Times-Picayune*, a newspaper for which he would soon be working as a freelance contributor.

After the initial attempts to rescue Floyd Collins resulted in failure, his plight began to draw local and then national media attention. When subsequent attempts, some heroic but others sadly incompetent, continued to fail, every newspaper and radio station in the country focused on Collins' tragic situation. It took an agonizing seventeen days for rescue crews to reach Collins, who had died, according to doctors on the scene, approximately twenty-four hours earlier. By that time, Floyd Collins was a household name throughout the United States, and his story quickly became legend. Historians of American journalism usually rank the Floyd Collins rescue effort as "the third biggest single news story between World War I and World War II, topped only by Lindbergh's trans-Atlantic flight in 1927 and the Lindbergh kidnapping of 1932".<sup>1</sup>

Faulkner's first exposure to Floyd Collins' entrapment underground probably came when the story broke on the front page of the Tuesday, February 3, edition of the *Times-Picayune*. As the story developed over the next sixteen days, Faulkner must have followed it with great interest. Surely it was a popular topic of conversation when Faulkner was drinking with his journalist



buddies from the *Times-Picayune*, a group consisting primarily of John McClure, book editor and copy desk man; Roark Bradford, a worker on the "nightside" city desk; and Lyle Saxon, reporter and feature writer. Although Faulkner might have heard radio reports as the Sand Cave tragedy evolved, it seems almost certain that in light of his close ties with the *Times-Picayune* during this time period (one of his "Mirrors of Chartres Street" sketches appears in the February 8 edition) his principal source of knowledge about Floyd Collins was the newspaper. For this reason, I shall present the particulars of the story as they were published in the *Times-Picayune*.

The direct evidence of Faulkner's familiarity with the story is a 92-line poem entitled, appropriately, "Floyd Collins." The poem was probably written sometime during the six months following Collins' death, but never appeared in print. The only surviving typescript is in the Rowan Oak papers at the University of Mississippi library. A subsequent version of the poem (the changes are slight) exists in typescript at the University of Texas library under the title "The Cave," but it too was never published. Only after one more revision did the poem finally appear as the untitled third section of *A Green Bough*. In all three versions, the essence of the poem is Faulkner's highly impressionistic rendering—strongly influenced by the French Symbolists—of Floyd Collins' thoughts and hallucinations as he lay trapped and dying in Sand Cave. The following lines are representative:

The cave no more a cave is: ribs of music  
Arch and crack the walls, the uncaged bats  
From earth's core break its spun and floating crust.  
Hissing seas rage overhead, and he  
Staring up through icy twilight, sees  
The stars within the water melt and sweep  
In silver spears of streaming burning hair.<sup>2</sup>

The three versions of the Floyd Collins poem are the extent of Faulkner's direct reference to the events at Sand Cave from January 30 to February 15, 1925, but they are enough to establish that Faulkner was intrigued by the story and probably knew it in detail, including the bizarre subsequent travels of Collins' body from the time of its removal from Sand Cave to its being placed on public display two years later in a glass-topped coffin at nearby Crystal



Cave. I contend that Faulkner was so fascinated by the story that key elements of it found their way into the narrative of *As I Lay Dying*. The image of Floyd Collins dying in Sand Cave and the subsequent journey of his corpse might possibly be viewed as prototypes of Addie Bundren in her coffin and the comic odyssey of her ill-fated family.<sup>3</sup> If so, Faulkner was certainly not alone in having been inspired by the experience of Floyd Collins. The events at Sand Cave gave rise to scores of poems and popular songs and almost as many feature articles and book-length studies that described and critiqued the rescue efforts. Robert Penn Warren's novel *The Cave* is based almost entirely on the Floyd Collins story, as is Billy Wilder's motion picture *Ace in the Hole*. However, because the Collins legend has since faded from popular memory, it is necessary at this point to recount the details of what transpired at Sand Cave as Faulkner knew them late in 1929 when he wrote *As I Lay Dying*.

First of all, Floyd Collins' occupation is usually listed as "farmer" when in reality he devoted most of his life to exploring caverns in the vicinity of Cave City, Kentucky. The advent of the automobile had made nearby Mammoth Cave an increasingly popular tourist attraction, thus provoking the so-called "cave wars" of the 1920s in which rival commercial caverns used misleading advertising and other unscrupulous techniques to attract unwary tourists headed for the nationally renowned wonders of Mammoth Cave. The tourist trade proved lucrative, and dirt-poor farm families like the Collins combed their land for caves that might attract visitors and their dollars. Having entered his first cave at the age of six, Floyd was well-known in the area as an inveterate, albeit reckless, cave explorer, a reputation considerably enhanced when he discovered Crystal Cave on his family's farm in 1917. The family quickly turned the cave, which contained many impressive formations, into a commercial enterprise, but it was too far off the main tourist highway to be more than a modest success.

When Floyd entered Sand Cave, located on a neighbor's farm just three hundred yards from the main road to Mammoth Cave, on January 25, he was looking for a spectacular new cavern or, better yet, an alternate entrance to Mammoth Cave itself. More a crack in the earth than a cave proper, Sand Cave presented formidable difficulties even for a caver of Floyd's experience. He had already spent a week widening the fissure with dynamite, but even so there was barely enough room to accommodate his slender body and



much of the rock overhead had been dangerously loosened by the blasting. Carrying only a penknife, a length of rope, a coal-oil lantern, and a compass needle which he superstitiously believed would "magnetize" his body so he could find his way out, he carefully negotiated the often tortuous twists of the passageway until he reached a point where he could stand. At his feet was a pit about sixty feet deep. Floyd used his rope to lower himself to the bottom and looked around long enough to convince himself that the cave showed promise of larger chambers further on. Thinking he had gone far enough for one day, Floyd clambered back up the side of the pit and wriggled into the passage out. However, at the narrowest point in the fissure, he accidentally kicked an overhanging rock which fell, pinning his left ankle. His lantern had broken and lay beyond his reach, leaving him in total darkness.

At first, Floyd panicked, screaming himself hoarse and clawing at the rock that held him until his fingers were raw and bloody, but gradually he began to calm down. After all, he had had many close calls before while caving, but had always managed to survive. He also was aware that Bee Doyle, owner of the farm that contained the cave, knew where he was and would surely start searching for him as soon as he was missed.

Floyd had been staying with Doyle while working in Sand Cave, and when Floyd failed to show up for dinner that evening, Doyle was concerned but assumed that Floyd had probably left the cave and gone to another friend's house. However, when the following morning brought no word of Floyd, Doyle summoned Edward Estes and his son Jewell and together they headed for Sand Cave. There they shouted into the cave and, hearing no response, entered. Doyle and Estes could not get past the first narrow turnaround, but the smaller Jewell managed to locate Floyd, who told him to bring Johnnie Gerald, the one man in the area he felt was knowledgeable enough to rescue him.

Word about Floyd's predicament quickly spread through the Cave City community, and a crowd began to gather at the cave entrance. When the Collins family was notified, Floyd's brother Marshall rushed to the cave and managed to make it to his brother's side, a feat which no one since young Jewell Estes had managed to accomplish. The passageway was obviously too narrow and extremely dangerous, and virtually all of those attempting to reach Floyd became either frightened or stuck. After a futile effort to pry Floyd free with a crowbar, Marshall returned



to the surface where he was soon joined by another brother, Homer, who also worked his way down to Floyd and for hours labored unsuccessfully to move the rock that pinned his brother's ankle. His efforts were further hampered by groundwater from rain and melting snow seeping into the cave, a problem which would only become worse as the days dragged on, and the fact that there was barely room enough in the cramped passage for one man to work. Finally, after bringing his brother a blanket and feeding him coffee and milk, Homer left the cave to recover his strength. This was Sunday morning, February 1. From this point on, the story becomes increasingly sensational and very amenable to Faulkner's dark comic vision of humanity.

More than a hundred people were now gathered outside Sand Cave, many of whom were becoming raucous and unruly from the moonshine passing freely among them. Several abortive rescue attempts were made, some by men who were obviously drunk, but there was no coordinated effort. Although many half-baked schemes were discussed, it soon became clear that no one had a viable plan to free their trapped neighbor. Marshall Collins offered a reward of five hundred dollars, and Homer tried his best to organize the crowd. Nevertheless, by Sunday midnight all rescue endeavors had fizzled out, and Homer could only sit beside Floyd and keep him company during the cold wet night. Floyd's extremities were numb and he had begun to hallucinate about angels in white chariots and his favorite foods.

The next day, reporters began to arrive, drawn by the wild reports coming out of Cave City. Chief among them was William "Skeets" Miller, a 21-year-old correspondent for the *Louisville Courier-Journal* who would soon become a national celebrity for his actions at Sand Cave and who would ultimately win a Pulitzer Prize for his reportage of the tragedy. When he first saw the dismal, dispirited scene at the cave entrance, Miller saw that no one was in control and that nothing was being done. Immediately accepting a challenge from an understandably irritable Homer, Miller went into the cave and, aided by his small build, quickly slithered down to Floyd's side, where the enormity of the problems confronting the rescuers was instantly apparent. Over the next few days, Miller would interview Floyd on several occasions, and the resulting stories, extraordinarily vivid and moving, soon appeared in virtually every newspaper in the country. Miller also assisted in further abortive attempts to free Floyd, and his courage and energy



led to his being accepted into the inner circle of the would-be rescuers. However, some reporters, jealous of Miller's "inside line" on the story, began to spread the word that Miller was grandstanding and behaving unprofessionally.

Other key events that day were the arrivals of Lieutenant Robert Burdon of the Louisville Fire Department and the long-awaited Johnnie Gerald, the highly regarded local caver who Floyd and his family were convinced could get him out. Both men arrived with compressed-air drills, but after much talk of drilling, they were convinced that the vibration would be too great a risk. Instead, they decided to put a leather harness around Floyd's shoulder and chest and pull him out by force, but this attempt failed when the pain proved to be too much for him. Once again, the rescuers were disheartened, and in rage and despair, Homer broke down in tears and offered five hundred dollars to any doctor who could reach Floyd and amputate his leg. He rescinded the offer after realizing that his brother would bleed to death before he could be gotten to the surface.

As the day progressed, more and more people arrived, some to offer their help and others as curiosity seekers. Some success was achieved in widening and shoring up the cave, but this ultimately accomplished nothing in improving Floyd's lot. The crowd outside became drunker and rowdier, and a split soon developed between the "outlanders" led by Burdon and the locals headed up by Gerald. Arguments and fistfights frequently erupted between the rival factions, and their differences only deepened as time passed.

Still, the rescue efforts dragged on. Skeets Miller tried to use a jack to raise the rock pinning Floyd's ankle. Homer searched desperately for another entrance to Sand Cave. Another man showed up with a large oxyacetylene torch and wanted to burn the rock away. When a generator arrived, a string of light bulbs was lowered into the cave, and Miller placed a bulb on Floyd's chest so he could have heat and light. But exhaustion and shattered nerves continued to get the better of the men involved. On Wednesday, February 4, part of the cave ceiling between Floyd and the surface collapsed as a result of the almost incessant rain, effectively cutting him off from all but voice communication with the outside world. But he continued to survive, even though his hope was rapidly dimming.

Finally, the chaos and confusion at Sand Cave and the ineffectuality of the rescue operations became apparent to state



authorities, and the governor of Kentucky responded by calling out the National Guard and dispatching professional engineers. While the soldiers established a protective perimeter around the cave entrance, the engineers quickly concluded that any attempts made through the existing passageway were doomed and that only by sinking a parallel shaft would they ever stand a chance of extricating Floyd. Johnnie Gerald and the "locals" objected vehemently, claiming that the shaft would take too long to dig, but General Henry H. Denhardt, now in control at the cave, overruled them and work on the shaft began.

Progress, however, was agonizingly slow. The rain caused the sides of the shaft to collapse, making it necessary to shore them up with timbers periodically, and the fear of more cave-ins in Sand Cave precluded the use of pneumatic drills and dynamite. Fortunately, there was no shortage of manpower to wield the shovels and pick-axes. Hundreds of volunteers showed up from all over the country, including college students, railroaders, quarrymen and hoboes. Still, it took twelve days to reach Floyd.

While the grueling work went on, the area beyond the National Guard's perimeter came to resemble a chaotic carnival as thousands of tourists flocked through to rubberneck. Ramshackle refreshment stands and snack bars sprouted overnight, and moonshine was sold on the sly. A radio station was set up at the rescue site and motion picture crews arrived to document the rescue attempt for theatre viewers throughout the nation. Lee Collins, Floyd's father, told anyone who would listen that it was "God's will" that his son was trapped, and Floyd's remaining brother, Andy Lee, turned up on January 6 after driving nonstop from his home in Illinois. As soon as he saw the cave opening he collapsed and had to be taken to Cave City to recover. The next day, a local woman named Alma Clark appeared claiming that she was Floyd's fiancée and that they were to have eloped that very day. The story later proved fantasy. On Sunday, February 8, a country preacher held a service at Sand Cave that attracted approximately 20,000 worshippers according to the *Times-Picayune*. Lee Collins handed out circulars advertising the wonders of Crystal Cave, sold photographs of Floyd for one dollar apiece, and eagerly accepted cash donations from the crowd while quoting scripture and telling stories about Floyd and his caving adventures.

The following week the story took yet another bizarre twist as rumours surfaced that Floyd had staged his entrapment as part of



an elaborate hoax to create publicity for Crystal Cavern and was now in hiding somewhere else. Other rumours held that he had been murdered. The situation became so confused that the governor appointed a court of inquiry, which convened on February 10 in Cave City. The proceedings were meticulously covered by the national press and contributed even more excitement to the already full-blown media circus. Johnnie Gerald and Lieutenant Burdon detailed the conflicts between the locals and outsiders. One witness accused Skeets Miller of being part of a "publicity stunt," forcing Miller to give extensive testimony describing his contacts with Floyd and demonstrating that a hoax could not possibly have occurred. Lee Collins took the stand to deny that he was making money from his son's misfortune and to describe the widespread availability and use of bootleg moonshine at the rescue site. When the court adjourned on February 14, it was generally agreed that Floyd was in fact imprisoned in the cave and that rescue attempts had been confused and botched until the intervention of the military and the sinking of the parallel shaft. However, as the *Times-Picayune* reported in its February 15 edition, by this time most people were also concluding that Floyd was dead.

Their fears were confirmed on Monday, February 16, when the rescuers connected the parallel shaft with Sand Cave by digging a lateral tunnel and discovered Floyd Collins' lifeless body. A doctor at the scene concluded that Floyd had died of exposure and starvation approximately forty-eight hours earlier on Friday the 13th. Early reports indicated that the Collins family was willing to have Floyd's feet amputated "if necessary" in order to bury him in his beloved Crystal Cave, but the next day Lee Collins authorized the sealing of Sand Cave with Floyd's corpse inside. On February 18, the lead story in the *Times-Picayune* carried the headline "Collins Sealed in Cavern" and a sub-head quoting Floyd in an interview with Skeets Miller: "Dreamed I Was Caught in Rock, Angels Carried Me Away."

Shortly thereafter, Homer Collins, displeased with his father's decision to seal Sand Cave, hit the Chautauqua circuit in an attempt to raise money to have his brother's body disinterred and buried at Crystal Cave. Homer's elaborate slide and film presentations attracted thousands in theaters throughout the country and earned him more than five hundred dollars a week. After renaming the family's chief enterprise "Floyd Collins' Crystal Cave" in an



attempt to lure visitors, Lee Collins also embarked on a lecture tour which consisted largely of his quoting scripture and begging for money to pay off a non-existent mortgage on his house. By April, Homer had made enough money to hire a construction firm to open Sand Cave and remove his brother's corpse. After much difficulty this was accomplished, and on April 26 Floyd was buried just outside the entrance to Crystal Cave with a large stalagmite as his tombstone.

The following year, Floyd's mother died on February 13, exactly a year after her son's reported demise. Less than three months later, Lee married a much younger woman, the "widow Ebinger" (he could not recall her first name), and the ceremony in a Louisville courthouse attracted a large crowd of reporters and curiosity seekers. "Crowds don't embarrass me," Lee told the reporters afterward. "All these people were welcome to watch my wedding. Now they can all come to Crystal Cave and I'll show them through."<sup>4</sup>

But Crystal Cave did not become the tourist bonanza Lee had hoped for, and in 1927 he found a buyer who would pay \$10,000 only if Floyd's remains could be exhumed and placed on display in the cave. Floyd's three brothers protested and filed suit to stop the transaction, but a judge ruled that the sale was legal. Accordingly, Floyd's body was disinterred and on June 13, 1927, after much cosmetic work to make it presentable, was placed in a glass-covered bronzed metal coffin and put in the middle of Crystal Cave's main tourist trail for viewing.

However, the journey of Floyd's corpse was still not over. Sometime on the night of March 18-19, 1929, the body was stolen from its coffin. Yet again the news media converged on Cave City, and their reports contained the following information, as summarized by Murray and Brucker:<sup>5</sup>

The casket was dusted for fingerprints, and bloodhounds, after being given Floyd's scent, were sent scurrying through the countryside. Before the day was over, Floyd's body with its left leg missing was discovered no farther than eight hundred yards from the cave, wrapped in a gunny sack and half-hidden in brush on the edge of the Green River. The following day, March 20, the peripatetic corpse was back in its coffin. The thieves were never apprehended and the missing leg was never found.



The owner of the cave decided to keep the coffin covered after that, but visitors were occasionally permitted a glimpse of Floyd's body. In 1961, the National Park Service purchased Crystal Cave and restricted access to Floyd's coffin. Finally, in response to requests by Floyd's descendants that he be given a "final" burial, his coffin was removed from Crystal Cave in 1989 and buried in a nearby church cemetery.

On the basis of the "Floyd Collins" poem which later became section three of *A Green Bough*, Faulkner was first intrigued by the imaginative possibilities inherent in Floyd's obviously "extreme" psychological state as he lay trapped in the narrowest of confines deep within the earth. Obviously influenced by Skeets Miller's accounts of Floyd's dreams and hallucinations and by reports (later proved false) that he had discovered a spectacular cave just before being pinned by the cave-in, Faulkner composed the poem as a stream-of-consciousness vision of crystal caverns and angelic hosts. But by the time he began writing *As I Lay Dying* in 1929, some of the more bizarre occurrences in the Floyd Collins saga, including the public display of the corpse and its subsequent theft, had happened only recently and were thus fresh in Faulkner's mind. Now thoroughly familiar with all of the key elements of the story that would occur in his lifetime, it seems possible that the tragi-comic dimension of the narrative appealed to him to the extent that it could have significantly influenced the composition of *As I Lay Dying*.

Furthermore, while it is impossible to establish beyond a doubt that Faulkner consciously used components of the Floyd Collins story in writing *As I Lay Dying*, there are sufficient points of strong similarity between the story and the novel to indicate that, consciously or unconsciously, Faulkner embodied elements of the story within his narrative.

First of all, the title of the novel can certainly be seen as descriptive of Floyd Collins' fate in Sand Cave. Faulkner first used "As I Lay Dying" as a title in 1928, when he reduced the major plot elements of his early novel-in-progress *Father Abraham* (later to become *The Hamlet*) to a short story which, after retitling and extensive revision, was published as "Spotted Horses." Aside from their titles, the only similarities between this early story and *As I Lay Dying* are that they each contain a character who "lay dying" (in the short story it is Henry Armstid) and that some of the same characters appear in both works. Faulkner himself identified the



source of the title as a phrase from the *Odyssey* where Agamemnon, in Hades, tells Odysseus of the wickedness of Clytemnestra,<sup>6</sup> but while the appropriateness of the source as revelatory of the theme(s) of *As I Lay Dying* has been convincingly demonstrated by Carvel Collins<sup>7</sup> and others, the passage in Homer sheds no light on the earlier story, where Armstid's injuries are the result of the same kind of carelessness and greed displayed by Floyd Collins in his spelunking adventures. While not questioning the efficacy of the Homeric source of the title and the analogues detailed by Dianne Luce in her *Annotations to As I Lay Dying*, I will suggest that Faulkner might also have had Floyd Collins in mind when he used the title. My reasons for doing so become clearer when one considers how Faulkner portrays Addie Bundren both alive and dead.

The image of Addie lying dead in her coffin dominates the novel. She is Faulkner's embodiment of the female principle, his parody and affirmation of the primal spiritual power manifested by the ancient figure of the Great Goddess. As Carl Jung, Erich Neumann, and other analysts of the archetypal feminine have indicated, the essence of the female principle is the enclosed space representative of the womb, and because the earth is also strongly identified with the feminine, the cave becomes the ultimate image of female enclosed space and, in fact, the earliest worship of the Great Goddess took place in caves. Faulkner was aware of these mythic associations from his reading of Sir James Frazer's *The Golden Bough* and must certainly have been struck by the raw power inherent in the image of Floyd Collins trapped and dying in the womb-like cave (his own Hades), especially when it first appeared that he would be permanently entombed there. The strength of this realization fueled the early "Floyd Collins" poem, but by 1928 and the writing of *As I Lay Dying*, Collins' corpse had been transferred to a coffin, buried, and then exhumed and placed on open display in Crystal Cave. Addie's enclosed space is also the coffin and it too is exposed to public view on its journey from the Bundren farm to Jefferson. By substituting a female figure for that of Collins, thus having his version of the Great Goddess literally present in the enclosed space, Faulkner must have sensed that he was redoubling the psychological impact of his image.

Another similarity between the novel and the news story is the determining presence of water. In almost every wire report from



Sand Cave, water figures prominently. From the very beginning, attempts to rescue Collins were severely hampered by unceasing rain, and Collins himself was subjected to a constant dripping of water on his face that had left a red mark on his cheek by the time he was found. Because of the saturated ground which made cave-ins more likely, rescue authorities decided to sink the parallel shaft, which in its turn was also plagued by the steady rain. Likewise, it is a period of heavy rain that delays the Bundrens' departure with Addie's unembalmed body and forces them to proceed to Jefferson by a roundabout way after the closest bridge over the Yoknapatawpha River has been washed out. In their attempt to ford the rain-swollen river, the relentless force of the water almost succeeds in sweeping Addie's coffin away, drowning Cash, and otherwise rendering the crossing (which quickly turns into a rescue attempt) a complete disaster.

In fact, the Bundren odyssey itself can be viewed as a sustained attempt to rescue Addie, to free her from the entrapment of her life and return her to "her people" in the Jefferson cemetery. This overwhelming desire to be somehow finally "saved" is at the core of Addie's motivation in demanding Anse's promise that she be buried in Jefferson. Furthermore, as was the case with the effort to save Collins, the Bundren rescue journey is hampered by dissention and incompetence. Anse and Jewel are singlemindedly wedded to fulfilling Addie's wishes, the former motivated by selfishness and stubborn pride and the latter driven by anger and love. Cash is stoically neutral, while Dewey Dell is almost totally preoccupied with her pregnancy. Darl, however, increasingly horrified by the absurdity of their endeavor, mounts his own "rescue attempt" when he sets fire to the barn containing Addie's by now reeking coffin (a rejected plan to rescue Collins involved using a large blow torch to burn the rock holding him). Even the hopelessly confused Vardaman makes an effort to save his mother by drilling "air holes" in her coffin (a metaphorically similar project was also rejected at Sand Cave, and the news stories contain many references to "drilling"). Additionally, the rope harness rigged up by Cash to pull the wagon bearing Addie's coffin across the flooded river bears at least a superficial resemblance to the harness used in a similarly unsuccessful attempt to drag Collins free by sheer force.

As the Bundrens' travelling spectacle winds its way toward Jefferson, the people it encounters are uniform in their disapproval



of the family's actions. Rachel Samson and Lula Armstid both call the procession "a outrage,"<sup>8</sup> and Tull, Armstid, Samson and Gillespie are frankly skeptical about the Bundren attempt, their collective feeling being that Addie should have been buried at nearby New Hope Church and spared the sacrilege of having her decomposing corpse manhandled across the countryside. When the Bundrens reach Mottson, they are immediately accosted by the town marshall who is horrified both by the condition of Cash's leg and the smell of the coffin: "Why, you'll kill him. . . . You'll cause him to lose his leg. You take him on to a doctor, and you get this thing buried as soon as you can. Don't you know you're liable to jail for endangering the public health?"<sup>9</sup> While reflecting the "townfolk" versus "country folk" conventions of traditional Southern humor, this split between the Bundrens and the community also parallels the division between the "locals" and the "outsiders" in the rescue operations at Sand Cave, where the opposing sides also felt that theirs was the only right way and said so vehemently at the court of inquiry, where many witnesses voiced their "outrage" at how the rescue had been conducted by their opposition. Moreover, Floyd Collins voiced his desire in two interviews that he be rescued by his "own people," just as Addie wants Anse and her children to be her "rescuers."

Likewise, while both the Bundren journey and the Sand Cave rescue effort contain episodes of individual heroism (e.g., Jewel's actions at the river and in Gillespie's burning barn, and the exploits of Homer Collins and Skeets Miller at Sand Cave), they soon degenerate into a macabre carnival born of futility and the self-interests of those involved. As the attempt to free Collins dragged on, the growing crowds became drunk and disorderly, Skeets Miller was accused of self-promotion, old Lee Collins openly solicited "contributions," and vendors, moonshiners, pickpockets, and con artists emerged to work the crowds. Similarly, as the Bundren family proceeds at the plodding pace of their mules, ulterior motives for the trip begin to emerge. Anse wants to buy a set of false teeth and find a new wife, Dewey Dell is desperate for an abortion, Jewel wants Darl committed to the asylum in Jackson, Vardaman craves bananas and is fascinated by the "town boys," and even Cash is in the market for a "graphophone." The point is that both the novel and the Collins story involve an epic undertaking that is rendered self-parodic by virtue of self-serving human nature. After the monumental effort to free him, Collins is



found dead, and by the time Addie reaches her grave, she has been all but forgotten by her family.

I have already noted the broad resemblances between the situations and characters of Floyd Collins and Addie Bundren, but there are other similarities between the people involved in the Floyd Collins story and characters in *As I Lay Dying*. Chief among these is the likeness between Lee Collins and Anse Bundren. The reporters covering the events at Sand Cave were immediately attracted to colorful "old Lee" and they quoted him extensively in their stories, where he is portrayed as idiosyncratic, stubborn, and fond of quoting the Bible ("The Lord giveth and the Lord taketh away" was his favorite scriptural reference, but he was also fond of the injunction "God's will be done"). His frequent arguments with his three sons were also covered, as were his questionable monetary motives. When he later sold Crystal Cave and permitted his son's body to be exhumed and placed on display, the press reported all the sensational details, and when he remarried shortly after the death of his wife, the wedding received national attention. Certainly Faulkner was drawn to Lee's grotesquely comic character and quite possibly had him in mind as a prototype for Anse Bundren, who also quotes his own scripture ("God's will be done . . . Now I can get them teeth"), stubbornly retains his role as patriarch in the face of all arguments and challenges, displays self-interest as a primary motivation, permits the exhibition of Addie's coffin on the journey, and acquires a new, younger wife almost as soon as Addie is buried.

Similarly, the "grouping" of the three Collins brothers—Homer, Marshall, Andy Lee—roughly parallels Faulkner's presentation of the three elder Bundren brothers—Cash, Darl, and Jewel. Collectively, both groups are alike in that they are devoted to the rescue of their brother and mother respectively while displaying a distinct antipathy toward their fathers. However, when one compares the individual Collins brothers with their Bundren counterparts the likenesses are not as apparent, mainly because Homer was the only brother to figure prominently in the news stories of the Collins tragedy. Marshall did manage on one occasion to reach Floyd's side, but more mention was made in the wire reports of his several "nervous collapses." Andy Lee's presence at the scene is barely noted at all after his arrival. Homer, on the other hand, distinguished himself early on by his heroic, often reckless attempts to save his brother (he once made a mad dash through the



National Guard perimeter in order to enter the cave after it had been placed off-limits by the authorities), but he too was also subject to nervous collapse, with several reporters speculating that he had become "unhinged" by the experience. I suggest that Faulkner might have embodied Homer's intense energy and heroism in the character of Jewel, and that he used the nervous breakdowns of Homer and Marshall in his portrayal of Darl's mental collapse as a consequence of the horrible absurdity of his family's journey. Conversely, Cash appears to be linked tangentially with Floyd, in that Cash's injured leg is held by rock (the cement of his improvised "cast"), . . . that like Floyd he endures his suffering stoically, and that Dr. Peabody, like a Dr. Hazlett in the news story, warns of the possibility of amputation. In addition, Floyd's belief in "animal magnetism" (he always carried a compass needle with him so that his body would be "properly aligned" while he was underground) is shared by Cash, who describes the magnetic field of a dead body in his account of why he made Addie's coffin "on the bevel" (73).

Finally, the weight of the evidence indicates that Faulkner was thoroughly familiar with the details of the Sand Cave tragedy when he wrote *As I Lay Dying* in about eight weeks during the autumn of 1929 and that significant elements of the Floyd Collins story quite possibly found their way into the novel. Although a direct influence cannot conclusively be established, the strong possibility of such influence is certainly worthy of note. Faulkner must have been intrigued by the Collins saga because it displayed so many of his own interests as a writer. After all, the cast of characters at Sand Cave in Kentucky were virtually identical to the kind of people he was writing about in his early Yoknapatawpha fiction, and it was their world he wished to portray in his novel. More important, however, is the likelihood that he recognized in the story the power and vibrancy of what became the dominant chord in *As I Lay Dying*: the epic, often heroic struggle of humans against nature, frustrated by the dark and sordid side of who we are.



## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Robert K. Murray and Roger W. Bruckner, *Trapped!: the Story of Floyd Collins* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1979), 261.

<sup>2</sup> William Faulkner, *A Green Bough* (New York: Smith and Haas, 1933), 11, lines 9-15.

<sup>3</sup> It should be recalled that Faulkner, an inveterate newspaper reader, was heavily influenced in the composition of *Sanctuary* by a plethora of news stories devoted to criminals and crimes in the colorful Memphis underworld. For example, the character of Miss Reba owes much to Mae Goodwin, the infamous Memphis madam, and the character of Popeye is at least partially derived from the notorious career of Popeye Pumphrey, a well-known Memphis gangster.

<sup>4</sup> Murray and Bruckner, *Trapped!*, 234.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 235-36.

<sup>6</sup> Dianne C. Luce, *As I Lay Dying*, William Faulkner, Annotations to the Novels (New York: Garland, 1990), 1.

<sup>7</sup> Carvel Collins, "The Pairing of *The Sound and the Fury* and *As I Lay Dying*," *Princeton University Library Chronicle*, 18 (spring 1957), 114-123.

<sup>8</sup> William Faulkner, *As I Lay Dying*, new ed. (New York: Random House, 1964), 103, 173.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 189.